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THE PLACE OF MODERN LANGUAGES IN AMERICAN EDUCATION¹

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The change from wagon to railway, trolley, automobile, and aeroplane, from letter to telegraph and telephone, from hand-power to steam and electricity, are but a few of the externals of an age of profound transition. The financial, political, social, moral, and intellectual revolution that has accompanied the material reconstruction is of equal magnitude and of more basal import. No less radical is the alteration that has taken place in the field of education, and here as elsewhere the static stage has not been reached. All indications point to further changes as radical as any in the past, and no man can with safety predict the forms that will prevail. As a consequence, we may not lull ourselves with the thought that what has been will be, nor rest in the assurance that systems and methods should be maintained for the sole reason that they have till now sufficed. The lessons of experience never cease to be valuable, but to be ready for the morrow we must test them by the fundamentals, by the sound educational principles that hold for all times and for all surroundings. There is today an especially potent call for the open mind. But an open mind involves mind as well as openness—the receptiveness must be intelligent. All change involves disturbance, discomfort, loss of time and energy, relegation to the scrap-heap, along with the outworn, of materials that are still serviceable. Changes can be justified only if there is a reasonable basis for expectation that they will result in a sum-total of ultimate gain.

Thus the question of determining the place of modern languages in American education is closely joined to the broader

¹ A paper read before the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club at Ann Arbor, March 30, 1911. A few copies of this and the papers by Professor Kuersteiner and President Nollen (*The School Review*, Vol. XIX, pp. 550-68) will be available for distribution. Those desiring a copy may address (inclosing a two-cent stamp) Mr. Louis P. Jocelyn, secretary of the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club, 541 South Division Street, Ann Arbor, Mich.

question of the relation of American education to the changing structure of our country. What their place now is, and whether it is justified, can best be determined by the history of our studies. What that place should be in the future must be judged on the basis of careful thought and cautious testing. What that place will be depends on us—on our receptiveness, our intelligence, our fidelity.

The undisputed right of the modern languages to more than a precarious and incidental place in our curricula is not of long standing. Looked upon, now as a trade equipment, now as an accomplishment, they were ranked with commercial bookkeeping and tables of foreign exchange, or with fencing and piano-playing; their fitting teacher, a German clerk in a counting-room or the local dancing-master. When taught in our schools, these subjects were held in scant esteem. Latin and Greek looked down on them in cold disdain, and the highest dignity which could be hoped was that a teacher of the ancient languages should add them to his subjects as a pastime. Such was our rank but a generation back. When a call was issued in 1883 for the conference of modern-language teachers that resulted in the establishment of the Modern Language Association, one of the leading university presidents said to the prime mover of the conference: "And will you not have my Chinese laundryman address you? He is past-master in one of your living languages." In 1886 the first periodical devoted to modern languages was issued, and its initial number appeared with but one name on the subscription list. No need to be ashamed of or to regret these inauspicious beginnings. It is well that every step of progress had to be earned, every advance in esteem to be merited. Not through inherited position, not by favoritism, it must be then by the merit of the cause that the quality of the teacher and his courses and the rank and dignity of the subject have grown so mightily. The Modern Language Association counts eleven hundred members: the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, *Modern Language Notes*, *Modern Philology*, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *The Romanic Review*, come monthly or quarterly to our desks; the earlier professorship of

modern languages in college and university has been replaced by separate teaching for German and for French in almost all cases, and for Spanish or Italian in many instances; German or French, or both, are now taught in all the leading secondary schools. And the strife between the ancients and the moderns no longer exists. Our aristocratic elder sisters do not send us to the nursery for our bread and milk when there is company to dinner, nor are they now unwilling that we should have young admirers of our own. They have not only ceased to snub us, but are glad to join forces in vieing with the attractiveness of the athletic young cousins who have opened up bakeries and cabinet-makers' shops on the ground floor, whose energy and aggressiveness are an excellent stimulus, but whose moving in makes us all sit close and taxes the resources of the house. Conceits aside, classics and modern languages are a great source of strength each to the other. It is they of the classics who have set the example which serves as a constant guide in developing the effectiveness of language as a discipline; while we perhaps have been able to throw light on the essential problem of associating language with life, of aiding the pupil to feel that language is more than a declining, conjugating, parsing, and scanning machine. Not that this has ever been the attitude of the representative teacher of the classics, but our greater opportunity for contact with the life behind the languages we teach enables us to point more readily the way to prevent its being the attitude of the pupil.

In the light of these facts, it is far from excessive to maintain that the rapid and substantial advance of modern-language work in America in the past thirty-five years demonstrates its vitality and usefulness and gives fine promise. The foundations are laid: what ought the superstructure to be? Is it in us to build for the future; to distinguish permanent values from quick and showy returns? Our subjects have an assured place in American education; we must give our thought and energy to its being the proper place. I should like to consider for a while the essentials of modern-language teaching if that place is to be attained.

The living languages have a concrete utility—a commercial value that can be demonstrated and that has been an impetus in their extension in the schools, even though it is nothing like so manifest here as in many other countries. Small need to argue with a Swiss that he should be a polyglot, when he can hardly walk out of a morning to stretch his legs without coming in contact with at least three languages; when the material prosperity, not only of many individuals but of the very nation, hinges upon making captious travelers comfortable in half a dozen tongues. The part the schoolmaster played in preparing the victories of the Franco-Prussian War or in rendering possible the commercial strides of the empire has been an ever-present object lesson to Germany and to the adjacent nations. But in the United States we have remained walled off, not alone by mighty oceans on the east and west, by commercial barriers on the north and south, but by our absorption in the development of a great country not yet peopled. Now we are learning that trade is a world-question; that permanent prosperity depends on outlets in the markets of all nations; that when we compete by letter or in person for our share of commerce we must be able to write or talk, as do our rivals, in languages the buyer can understand, and that we must know enough of his habits and his modes of thought to find common bases of interest. While we slept, or read David Harum, or discussed the baseball score, the rich trade of South America has gone to other bidders. This is no negligible factor, no unimportant detail, and yet—and yet—if that be the ground of our teaching languages, we should plan our courses in the schools somewhat in this order: Portuguese; Spanish; Chinese; Tagalog; and we should make the chief aims: commercial letter-writing; phrases of barter; the terminology of poker, pinochle, or whatever game it be that international drummers affect. And, after all, still keeping the practical standpoint, what proportion of the pupils of an average high school would ever find occasion to put this equipment into service? Viewed still more broadly, is education in language to be measured by the power to rattle off set phrases in a foreign tongue? If so, we shall never be able to cope as educated types with the

flunkeys of any cosmopolitan hotel. It is not thus that we measure educational values. The broader contact with world-interests that comes from a study of foreign languages and the knowledge of the languages themselves is of importance and value from a commercial standpoint; but if this be the sole or even the main aim of their study they fail to justify themselves, not alone in their cultural value, but even from a practical point of view. The school of commerce or the Berlitz school can do this work more effectively than we, and doing it alone for such as have need or wish for it can save us from burning up the house each time we wish to roast a pig.

If, in our general school system, a widespread teaching of the modern languages cannot be justified by their commercial value, no more can it be defended merely and alone on the ground of their utility as spoken media. Pleasant as it may be, and helpful withal, for the American to converse with the native in his own tongue when he journeys across the water, we who have taught know all too well that, in the time it is possible to allot, the average pupil will not learn to speak German or French. The best that can be accomplished, and the most it is wise to aim for under our present system, is to give him a solid foundation in the structure of the language and a facility in reading, and along with this to accustom his ear to the sound of the language when spoken—a hearing knowledge rather than a speaking knowledge—so that if opportunity offer for him to practice the speech he may at least be equipped to utilize this opportunity wisely and successfully. This we owe to our pupils; to the overwhelming majority of them, to those who will never have this opportunity, we also owe that the courses shall not be shaped to the use of the minority at the cost of the others.

The vitality of the modern languages as a subject in the American school depends on none of these externals, but must find its source and determine its ultimate measure on the basis of the two old, unchanging, and unchangeable factors of education: the value as a training for the mind, as a discipline; and the cultural value. These are the fundamentals; the practical values already mentioned are the accessories; not to be exagger-

ated, not to be neglected; hurtful if they replace, but valuable if brought into proper relation to, the essentials.

But, says the critic, you are repeating the reasons advanced for the study of the classics, and on which the classics are waging a fight of uncertain outcome to hold their own in our educational system. Can we not choose a better strategic position than this, which seems at present to be resulting for them in few victories and some reverses? I answer deliberately: No! As subjects with a commercial, concrete value easily measured in dimes and dollars, easily applicable in later life to business ends, the languages cannot vie with the natural sciences, cannot even vie with history or social science, cannot vie, I may add, with bread-making or carpet-laying or gas-fitting or clothes-cleaning. Our opportunity lies in joining forces with the defenders of the classics for the maintenance of education in its full meaning as distinguished from technical and business preparation. The natural sciences have educational value as a discipline, but are inadequate on the cultural side; historical, political, and social science have cultural value, but are inferior to language as a discipline. The languages combine the two values as does nothing else. It may be that we live in an age and a country in which the tendencies are against a full appreciation of our attitude; the more potent then the demand that we stand unitedly and aggressively for the things of which our youth have need. We might relax our watchfulness in a nation of idealists, or there make way, without loss, for the physicist or the chemist; here we are needed, and here we need, as nowhere else, to stand for the best we represent. If we do our duty and if we measure up to our mission the outcome is not doubtful. We are at the flood-tide of the conditions that have turned our people to the material side of life; to build for and to help shape the coming conditions is our opportunity, and can alone be our justification. The study of the classics has lost, at least relatively, some of its extension: is there no connection between this fact and the decline, which we hear so loudly deplored, of accuracy and of style in the English written in our schools? Has not England, where the classics better maintain their rank, a superiority over

us in this? And in measuring the causes of the increased pressure on the classics as a subject in the schools, we must not forget the competition of the modern languages. Our development has meant that they must share their space with us. After all, if Greek has largely disappeared, and if Latin has failed to strengthen its hold, the total of language work in our schools and colleges is far greater than it was a generation back, and it is safe to say that the students are giving at least as large a proportion of their time to language study as they then did. The question thus becomes whether we of the modern languages are properly fulfilling, shall properly fulfil, our part of the work. There is no obligation on us to seek to impinge further on the space the classics have occupied. Viewed merely from a selfish standpoint, our work is lightened and rendered more effective by all the Latin and all the Greek the pupil studies. There *is* obligation on us, and on the teachers of the classics as well, that we shall unitedly work to attain the educational ends that we believe language study serves; and upon us there rests the duty of serving these ends as effectively as they. If it be true that the students' grasp of English is showing diminution, it lies with us to question gravely whether we of the modern-language group are accomplishing the part we have assumed in language work as effectively as the classic teacher.

So far as regards cultural value, the study of the speeches of modern Europe affords opportunities that are equal to the best. The broadening influence of contact with the thought of other nations through the medium of the original language lies, first, in the close connection between thought and its form of expression. Each people has its own sequence of ideas, its own stylistic forms, its own shadings of vocabulary. Attempts at literal rendering give only translations devoid of artistic qualities and incapable of renewing in the reader the impression the writer is seeking to transmit. Truly good translation, on the other hand, involves the thorough recasting of the foreign form of expression, and, while the result may be a correct rendering of the thought, expressed in excellent English, such an interpretation is a triumph for the translator rather than for the trans-

lated. Goethe seated at our side, speaking in flawless English of today, would be a wonderful table-companion, but could never carry us out of ourselves into a new realm of thought and feeling as can the Goethe of Weimar.

The second great opportunity for culture from the study of foreign languages consists in the insight this study gives, not alone into the literature, but into the life, the social structure, the art—into the whole civilization of those who think and feel in other ways than we, and whose thoughts find expression in other words and in other acts than ours. Here is where German or French, Italian or Spanish, is a priceless domain. Much as the archaeologist has learned, familiar as we are with many details of the life of the past, our knowledge of the nations that have ceased to be cannot compare with the insight we can gain into the civilization of our neighbors; and the power to make our subjects living, vivid realities is mightily augmented by familiarity with habits and surroundings and by nearness in time and place. The man of culture is not merely he who knows the thought, the feeling, the art, the life of others; though possessed of the widest knowledge, he is still narrow who interprets all things in terms of his own attitude, who remains ever—how hard this to escape!—the center of his universe. The hall-mark of culture is the power to see with the eyes of others, to comprehend even where we do not acquiesce, to interpret not in our terms but in the terms of him who speaks. A man of culture, taking his *Don Quixote* from the table, becomes straightway a Spaniard of the olden days. Let another try to read, *Don Quixote* remains a keyless puzzle, or is solved in terms of a Sam Jones or a Coxie. A man steeped in French thought and life is likely to find, when speaking in French, that the substance as well as the form of what he says is at times altered: that he is thinking and speaking from the French point of view, and is saying things it does not come to him to say when his medium is English. When in Paris do as the Parisians do is a safe precept only if we choose the right Parisians as our models; but when in Paris, whether in body or spirit, look if you can on things Parisian through the Parisian's eyes. The acquisition of power of self-

detachment, so difficult to attain, so contrary to the spirit of provincialism, of chauvinism, is furthered in no way better than by an intimate knowledge of peoples who reject much that we accept and accept much that we reject; yet who live in our day, have the same general material, moral, and intellectual problems to face, and are meeting them at times not so well, at times better than we. This is a kind of contact with things new which adds not alone to our resources but to our resourcefulness.

There is a further broadening effect of language that carries with it far-reaching results when the languages are those of our contemporaries. Small-minded confidence in superiority over those who do not speak and act and think as we is bred of ignorance and cannot long resist the admiration which comes with a knowledge of the best in their literature and life. And on this follows a diminution of the hostility between nations and a strengthening of the forces that are at work for peace. Keen international rivalry for political and commercial supremacy cannot but continue to occasion enmities, but every pupil whom we bring to understand the language and the thought of a foreign country gives an added impetus to the growing spirit of friendliness and conciliation.

Now, granted that the study of the modern languages has the requisites for satisfying this, the cultural requirement in education, what is its fitness as a discipline? No one would question that it furnishes valuable training for the mind, that it develops the reasoning powers; but is it at all to be compared in this respect with the study of the classic languages? Many will be disposed to agree with Mr. James Bryce, who, in a recent address at the Johns Hopkins University, gave the preference to the languages rich in inflections. Still, I believe it is not too much to maintain that French or German, when properly taught, may be made as effective a discipline for the mind as Latin or Greek. A rich inflectional system does undoubtedly furnish an excellent basis for drill in grammatical relations, a drill all the more valuable as an incentive to thought because it is lacking in English and thus forces the pupil to acquire forms of analysis to which he is unaccustomed. Yet, on the other hand, while the differ-

ences of the modern European languages from the English are often of a type which does not so quickly show on the surface, they are none the less innumerable, and the very fact that in many cases they do not disclose themselves at the first glance is an aid, in the hands of a careful teacher, to training in accurate thought. The opportunity for this training begins with the first lesson in pronunciation. It remained wholly unutilized under the old system of teaching, when the foreign sounds were simply replaced by their nearest English equivalents, and when such sounds as have not even a faint reflection in our language were explained by incorrect descriptions or crude directions such as these: "The French *u* has a sound precisely agreeing with that of the German modified *u*"; "To pronounce French *u*, start as if you were going to say *oo* and quickly say *ee*." How many times, as a boy, I strove to put these directions into practice, invariably ending up with an English *u* or an English *e*! Today, proper instruction in pronunciation begins with an analysis of the speech-organs for each sound, accompanied by constant illustration and practice; next moves on to explanation and practice in the methods of syllable-building and stress; and can then be readily extended to the word or the word-group. Such clear and simple treatises as Nyrop's *Manuel phonétique du français parlé* furnish a guide to the teacher, while the charts of German and of French sounds prepared in accordance with the system of the International Phonetic Association provide the essential classroom apparatus. The inculcation of new sounds by a study of the positions of the speech-organs is not only the sole way to teach correct pronunciation to such pupils as have passed beyond early childhood, it is also a valuable training in applying the powers of observation and analysis to a set of activities which the individual, in spite of the fact that it is he who is performing them, rarely observes, and which he can interpret correctly only after attentive and intelligent effort.

Again, while it is customary to consider the French as poor in inflections, comparison of similarities and differences between the French and the English offers a field limited rather by the inflexibility of our thought than by a real absence of inflection

in the French. It is easy to see that *homme*, singular, and *hommes*, plural, are identical in sound, and it is in itself a valuable drill to teach the pupil to distinguish between mere eye-differences and those which have a real existence in the spoken word; but it is misleading to teach that "man" and "men" are alike *homme[s]*; "man" is *un homme*, "men" is *des hommes*; "the man" is *l'homme*, "the men" is *les hommes*. The *un, des, le, les* are inflections just as are *homin-em, homin-es*. Similarly, in *je chante, tu chantes, il chante, elle chante*, the *je, tu, il, elle* are inflections, as is shown by the fact that if we really desire to express the pronoun subject it must be done in some other way. *Il chante* is not "HE sings," but *chanter*, third singular present, and we have to depend on the context to determine whether the subject is "he," "it," or a phrase or clause following the verb. The Old French, which had more flecational suffixes, did not need to express such a *je, tu, il*; it could say simply *chant, chantes, chantet*. In the modern French, when we are aiming really to express a pronoun subject we do it by saying: *moi, je chante; je chante, moi; c'est moi qui chante*, etc. French is not stricken with inflectional poverty; it simply has replaced, in a number of instances, suffixes by prefixes, prefixes which are in the writing still detached but which are none the less prefixes. The Latin suffixes *-o, -as, -at*, etc., probably arose by the merging of what were in the first place detached words. The French future tense arose in the same way, and *je chanterai* was originally *cantare habeo*. Similarly *enlever*, "to carry off," shows a merging into one word of elements that still remain separate, for the written language at least, in the exactly similar *s'en aller*, "to move off."

It is only a superficial observer, however, who sees in inflections the sole or even the main opportunity for language drill. They are valuable for this purpose; but they tend, when not intelligently handled, to become a mere mechanical exercise. It is the broader fields of syntax and word-signification that offer the most numerous and the most alluring occasions for training in exact thinking. Syntactical study is never simple and never easy, but it does not need to be dreary or dry. The psychological processes which lead the French to employ the expletive *ne*; to

substitute the historical present or the present perfect for the narrative past tense, or the present for the future; the reasons which have caused the imperfect subjunctive to fall into disuse or which determine the placing of the adjective before or after its substantive—these and similar questions give to syntax a reality and a vividness that must appeal to the teacher and through the teacher can be made to appeal to the scholar.

Most fruitful of all as a training to exact thought is the study of words. In English we group a variety of actions under the term "to walk": it is used, for instance, in the meanings "to advance on foot"; "to advance on foot at a deliberate pace"; "to go on foot"; "to come on foot"; "to move on foot for recreation," etc. That is to say, in English we have chosen as central idea the method of locomotion, joining with it now one, now another connotation which we leave to be determined from the context. The French group these ideas differently, distributing out the various ideas we have assembled around "going afoot" into the other classes where they also belong. It therefore has no inclusive verb "to walk": the method of locomotion is what it usually leaves to be determined from the context. "He walks up to me" is "he comes to me"; "I walk up to him" is "I go to him," and so on. It is in consequence impossible to translate "walk" into French without analyzing from the context the purpose or the accessories of the walking; just as it is impossible to translate into English the French *se promener*, "to take recreation by moving from place to place," without first stopping to determine whether the mode of motion is walking, or riding, or driving. This illustration is nearer to being typical than it is to being exceptional. Except for the names of simple and concrete ideas, word-values rarely coincide in different languages. The sum-total of the thought may be the same, but the sentence will be made up of materials of different shape, size, and texture. Accurate translation from English into a foreign language or vice versa involves not alone careful analysis of the foreign speech but of the mother-tongue as well.

Phonetics, inflection, syntax, and word-meaning can be utilized at all stages of the study of a language. No less important

is the analysis of style, but it can be successfully undertaken only with students who pursue their language-work to a point of considerable advancement. It is perhaps here that we have the most to learn from the language-teaching in the French schools. Their teaching of style, whether Latin or French be the subject-matter, through the analysis, in their courses on text-interpretation, of the modes and methods of composition as shown in the best writers, plays no small part in the remarkable facility the French show in expressing themselves clearly, accurately, and in good form—a facility notable in our youth, as a rule, only by its absence. In our graduate French work at the Johns Hopkins University we are endeavoring to develop this type of study, so that the teachers we send out may go forth adequately equipped in this regard. Thus much I may already say, at an early stage of the experiment: the students, while finding this work peculiarly difficult by reason of its newness to them, have entered on it with zeal and are enthusiastic over its possibilities.

In the foregoing discussion of the opportunities offered by the modern languages for the forming of trained thinkers I have restricted my illustrations to French because of my greater familiarity with that subject. Those who are working in German can readily supply as potent examples drawn from that language. In fact, the problem is not whether the modern languages furnish sufficient and satisfactory material for study that shall meet the highest cultural and disciplinary standards; it is rather how, in the time at our disposal for teaching these languages, we can find a place for giving to the pupil even a small part of the wealth of training for which they furnish so abundant opportunity. We deal with a subject-matter capable, by its variety and richness, of being rendered the most useful and the most absorbing in our curriculum.

The goal is inspiring. Do we at present ever attain this goal? Alas, the knowledge and wisdom and faith the teacher needs, whatever his subject, so far exceeds the best we have, the best that many of us can hope to have! More practical and more essential is the question: Are we aiming for this goal? Are we utilizing our present equipment to the best of our ability? Are

we enlarging it in every possible way? Are we endeavoring to give the pupils, in so far as it is practicable, familiarity with the modern languages in their written and spoken form, insight into the civilizations that are reflected through them, training that comes from their analysis? It is for each of us to answer for himself and to himself. But this much can be said: The rewards of teaching are not such as lure men and women of low ideals or material aims; life is a treadmill to the routine teacher, a nullity to the teacher who is no idealist. There is ground for faith in our teachers. We are full of defects—who knows that we are not as often disappointing to our pupils as they are to us?—but in no profession is there a greater devotion to the work for the work's sake, a greater desire to do the work well for the reward that comes in the sense of work well done. With this spirit directing the body of our teachers, we may have confidence that the gain in intensiveness in the teaching of the modern languages is destined more nearly to keep pace with their present rapid extension in our schools. The power lies within our grasp of aiding to form a new generation broader in culture, clearer and more exact in thought; not alone more comprehensive in their grasp of languages, but masters of the written and the spoken word of their own language as they could never have been without our aid. May it be granted to us to have a share in bringing this to pass!